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# To Infinity and Beyond

Aviation is 150 years young rather than 100 years old

**By Sir Richard Branson**

Who better to introduce Locum Destination Review's, celebration of 100 years of powered flight than Britain's own most famous aviation entrepreneur? Sir Richard Branson here describes how the Wright Brothers' success has inspired him.

Although this year we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of flight as we mark the Wright Brothers momentous powered lift off from Kittyhawk in North Carolina, it is in fact the case that since the mythical days of Icarus, the dream of flying has fascinated humanity. Greek, Chinese, Roman, Medieval, Renaissance and then the Industrial Revolution applied the brains were applied to the prospect of people being able to take to the air and fly. Leonardo da Vinci correctly theorised flight, the Chinese managed to do it with sophisticated kites and the French and British armies were both using balloons for artillery spotting by the end of the Napoleonic wars.

However, it was a wonderfully intelligent and eccentric genius of an Englishman who can quite rightly be called the father of aviation and this year we are actually marking the 150th anniversary of the flight of his plane, which in turn inspired the Wright Brothers.

Sir George Cayley was one of those amazing characters whose thirst for science and technology led him to the discovery of the principles of flight and successfully launch an aircraft with his coachman on board using a modern wing concept. The big day happened in Yorkshire in 1853 and the only thing that Sir George knew he lacked was a modern internal combustion engine to turn it into a powered flight. 50 years later the famous American brothers credited him with the concept that led to their success on that cold December day.

I think it is this 'magnificent men in their flying machines' era of aviation that most excites me. From Cayley to Kittyhawk and beyond, the weird and wonderful contraptions of the early days of flight are awe-inspiring. So much so that last summer I repeated the 1853 flight in a replica of the 'Cayley Flyer' across Brompton Dale in Yorkshire and it was every bit as exciting as being in a jet fighter or Concorde!

I suppose I empathise with the very idea of stepping into the unknown that those early pioneers embody. The unique thing about aviation, unlike most other areas of scientific and technological development, is that the concept of stepping into the unknown has continued right





into the modern era in almost every field of flying. It began for me as a child, not only because my mother was one of the first ever air stewardesses, but also because I was fortunate to meet Douglas Bader when I was a young boy. For those who don't remember, he was the hero RAF pilot who fought through the battle of Britain in his Hurricane, having already lost his legs before the war and survived being captured by the Germans, escaping many times and finally spending a spell in Colditz after having his two tin legs confiscated by the Germans!

Men like Douglas Bader or Frank Whittle (who developed the first jet engines in the UK) or Chuck Yeager (who flew the first rocket plane) or Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong on the Moon are now being followed by a new generation of pioneers who continue to inspire. It is only 18 years since Per Lindstrand and myself were the first people to fly a hot air balloon across the Atlantic and yet we now have people like Bertrand Piccard, Andy Elson and Steve Fossett who have flown balloons around the world and still want to take the technology of aviation to its limits in every area. Very few other fields of industrial technology have continued to inspire us with the same imagination.

Inset / Sir George Cayley



I have also found this true in the entrepreneurial side of aviation. I don't think Virgin Atlantic, Virgin Blue in Australia or Virgin Express in Europe would exist if it had not been for the personal inspiration I got from Sir Freddie Laker. As a young entrepreneur in the music business in the 1970s, I may have been listening to the Sex Pistols but I was reading about Freddie and his ideas of bringing cheap travel to the masses. This was the man who had helped organise the Berlin airlift of 1948 and developed the world's first package holidays in the 1950s. By the time Anarchy in the UK was blasting out from stereos across the country Laker Airways and the famous Laker Skytrain were bringing the prospect of America to the first generation of young Brits who could seriously contemplate going there. People today find it amazing to hear what a revolution went on. At today's prices a trip by air across the Atlantic in 1939 cost £30,000 but by the time Laker Skytrains hit the scene it was still the equivalent of £8,000. For a brief few years prices began to tumble if you were prepared to sleep in a tent at Gatwick Airport to wait for your flight.

Watching Freddie get wiped out in the spring of 1992 by a bunch of bullying, government owned or monopolistic mega carriers was very sad. It was



Image courtesy of Virgin

obvious to me that they were in reality destroying something they could not compete with, and that changed my life. When his licence between Gatwick and New York became available one year later, I plucked up the courage to phone him myself and ask his advice. The meetings that I had with him inspired the creation and development of Virgin Atlantic into what it is today.

However this has also been a sad time for aviation, with the retirement of Concorde - an aircraft that has inspired at least two generations. It is also a British design icon, with even the interiors designed by Sir Terence Conran. Getting rid of the aircraft and engaging in an act of industrial vandalism by grounding them, is almost too much. Whatever happens over the next few months, a couple of these beautiful machines must be kept flying if only to inspire future generations.



This is not difficult to achieve but with the remaining British Airways fleet all being grounded and put on static displays on far-flung corners of the world, the task will become almost impossible. It is not too late to save her and I have even offered BA a donation towards a heritage trust to keep at least one flying.

As we close the 100th anniversary there are bright spots as well despite the trials of the industry after September 11.

Aviation today is just as exciting and inspiring for me as it's always been. Virgin Atlantic is developing the world's most efficient aircraft ever built: Virgin Atlantic Globalflyer is a project being undertaken with Steve Fossett (or myself) flying this unique plane around the world un-refuelled. We hope to prove that new technologies can make air travel as efficient as the train in the future and indeed our Virgin Globalflyer will burn less fuel per hour than a family four wheel drive.



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The lessons learned from building an ultra light super efficient aircraft will be key in the next stage of our second century of aviation. Cheap space travel is becoming the dream of this century much as cheap air travel was the dream of the last century. The world's population is set to double again over the next 30 years but the resources of space remain out of reach for ordinary people. NASA, the Russians and the Chinese all hide their military expenditure behind the façade of space programmes which use incredibly expensive 1940s German rocket technology to hurl tiny payloads into near space. Given the economics of what have now become ridiculous gestures, we will never reach for the stars in any real sense. If big governments are allowed to dominate space, our exploration will be reduced to a few unmanned probes and masses of military hardware surrounding our planet.

As I look back on the last 100 years and forward to the next 100 it is clear that there



has to be another way and I think we may be much closer to a breakthrough in breaking big government's control of space than most pundits think. The X Prize in the USA for the first private flight into space by a reusable vehicle twice in two weeks is a goal, which NASA could not currently achieve. There is a high chance that it will be won before 2005 raising the prospect of space flight for individuals for the same price per person as those early transatlantic flights of 1939. The achievement of that will have vast consequences, many good but some bad. Let's hope the lessons we have learned from man's industrial century of war and aviation on our own planet, will make the revolution in space more benign than the industrial revolutions on earth have been.

Here's to another 150 years of flying!